

Art of the Balisong

When we were living in Jackson, TN during the early 90's, I met a police officer by the name of Spencer. We were both Shriners and sometimes he would use his unmarked police car to drive us from Jackson to the Al Chymia building in Memphis for Shriner activities. I loved it. Cars would automatically slow down when they saw this blue, unmarked, but obviously police Ford Crown Victoria. Prior to becoming an officer, he had served in the U.S. Navy and was stationed at the huge base in Subic Bay, Zambales. Subic was the largest U.S. military installation outside the United States. They could dry dock and repair the biggest aircraft carriers of the Vietnam era. (The base closed in 1992.) Spencer told me that he had purchased a *balisong*, a butterfly knife made in the eponymous Batangas town. The town, or *barangay*, is literally a stone's throw from the Orosa ancestral town of Taal. These balisongs were made of steel (more on that later), the blade ranging in length from a few inches to more than a foot. Apparently, the Navy frowned upon its sailors carrying such implements, leading to the confiscation of Spencer's balisong. Having settled into his police lieutenant's position and raising a family, Spencer was nostalgic about his Navy days. He requested that I purchase a balisong for him on my next trip back, which I was glad to do. I then gave it to him as a *pasalubong*.

The balisong had its 15 minutes of fame, in the movies and on television, compliments of no less than Angelina Jolie. The balisong appeared in movies before, including "Lethal Weapon" and "Karate Kid." Even in the forgettable "Cheech and Chong." But who remembers scenes in those movies where the balisong made its appearance? But Jolie, we can sure remember. She played the main character in "Tomb Raider" and used a balisong. There is a scene where she talked on the phone while flipping a balisong. During an appearance at Conan O'Brien's late night show, Jolie was handed a balisong. Conan must have known that Jolie is an avid knife collector, with several balisongs in her collection. Jolie proceeded to whip the knife around like she did in the movie. I was impressed. Only one side of the balisong is sharpened but if you made a mistake in swinging the blade, you could slice a part of your finger off. The balisong is sharpened to the point where you can get a clean shave with it.

I have never seen a balisong made, which I'll have to correct on my next trip back to the Philippines. But there is an abundance of videos in YouTube, if you don't wish to make a trip to the barangay of Balisong. There are no large manufacturers of balisong, only a bunch of craftsmen working in what has remained a cottage industry. Driving through the town, you become aware that just about every other house claims to craft the best balisong. Each house / store would have a few score knives at the most. Only the large stores in Taal would carry an extensive inventory. When I bought the balisong for Spencer, I asked the young man where he learned his craft. The answer was simple, and gratifying, "from my father." The balisong process is nowhere near as time consuming or intensive as making a *katana* or *samurai* sword, where the blade is folded, pounded, heated, folded, pounded, a dozen times or more. Note that after folding for the tenth time, there are over 1,000 layers fused together. Although not subjected to the degree of lamination as the katana, balisong making is still a very manual process. The only modern machinery is a tempering oven, but some craftsmen still use an old fashioned forge. There is no standard for the material used in the blade. One of the balisong artisans told me the best ones were made from ball bearings. I'm no metallurgist, but it would take a mean forge to

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fuse those bearings together. The next best would be from a car's leaf springs. So if you meet someone from Batangas offering to buy your old junk vehicle, he might really just be interested in the leaf springs.

The origin of the balisong is somewhat murky. A Batangueño, especially one from Balisong, would tell you they've been making it forever. This is not a stretch, because Batangas civilization goes way back. Tagalog speakers, they used the Baybayin script, well before the arrival of the Spaniards. (Note that I use Baybayin to sign my name in my emails.) The Moros of Mindanao and artisans in the Indonesian archipelago have made swords and knives for centuries. Their signature sword is the *kris*, wavy and double edged. So the Batangueños could well have been crafting balisongs before the Spaniards.

There are sketches of knives that sure look like balisongs, from a 1710 French book. There were various European manufacturers making butterfly knives in the 19th century. Nevertheless, in the Philippines, the balisong is only associated with the province of Batangas. Perhaps someday we'll discover how the balisong traveled from one corner of the world to another.

There was a time when as a rite of passage, every young Batangueño would purchase his own balisong. It would be tucked behind his waistband, a sort of concealed carry weapon. Parents, especially mothers, never approved, but if you were a Batangueño, you carried one. But today only the tourists buy balisongs. Just make sure it is in the checked suitcase, not the carry on, when you head to the airport. After I bought the balisong for Spencer, my now 88 year old first cousin Naring gave me his own balisong. Nearly 20 years later, the balisong is in my desk, as sharp as ever, gleaming, with not a spot of corrosion. A true work of art. May the craftsmen of Balisong keep passing the art from father to son, or daughter.

I sometimes wonder whatever happened to Spencer and his balisong.

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